

Department of the Treasury

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# **SEXUAL HARASSMENT**

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## **Your Rights and Responsibilities**



Office of Equal Opportunity Program

## Introduction

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This brochure is intended to educate Treasury employees about the prevention of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is a matter of particular concern because it seriously damages the employee-employer relationship, demeans the individual subjected to such conduct, and destroys the overall morale of an organization. All of our employees must be allowed to work in an environment in which they are treated with dignity and respect and which supports the Department's commitment to being one of the best employers within the Federal government.

We should all make certain that acts of sexual harassment are not condoned or tolerated anywhere in the Department. Sexual harassment is illegal, disrespectful, damaging to all employees and will not be tolerated. Employees must feel free to discuss and report any incident involving sexual harassment, without fear of reprisal or retaliation. Those in leadership positions must take personal responsibility for ensuring that we adhere to the highest standards of conduct and that all complaints of this nature are handled sensitively, immediately and appropriately.

I urge all employees to treat others with dignity and respect in order to provide a workplace that is free from sexual harassment.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Paul H. O'Neill". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Paul" and last name "O'Neill" clearly distinguishable.

Paul H. O'Neill  
Secretary of the Treasury

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## What is the Department's Sexual Harassment Policy?

The Department of the Treasury is committed to providing a work environment that is free from sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is illegal, disrespectful of an individual's rights, and damaging to all employees. Employees are free to report any incident involving sexual harassment without fear of reprisal. Management will take prompt and appropriate action whenever an allegation of sexual harassment is brought to its attention, including the swift disciplining of any employee who is found guilty of violating the Department's policy.

## Sexual Harassment Defined and What Are Some Examples of It?

Sexual harassment is prohibited under Title VII of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 as a form of discrimination on the basis of gender.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has established guidelines defining sexual harassment as follows:

**Unwelcome** sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when:

- (1) submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of employment,
- (2) submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as the basis of employment decisions affecting such individual, or
- (3) such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment.

Incidents of sexual harassment are sometimes described as falling into one of two categories.

(1) The first of these is the **quid pro quo** ("this for that") category, which occurs when an employer or supervisor conditions tangible job benefits on acquiescence to unwelcome sexual conduct, or penalizes an individual for refusing to participate in such conduct. **Quid pro quo** harassment would include such behavior as:

- A supervisor demanding sexual favors in exchange for promotion, favorable job assignments, or other job benefits.

(2) The second category is a **hostile working environment**, which occurs when unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature unreasonably interferes with an individual's job performance or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment. Such conduct may include:

- sexist or stereotypical remarks about a person's clothing, body, appearance or activities;
- harassing or abusive remarks regarding a person's sexual activities or gender;
- sexually-oriented jokes, stories, remarks or discussions;
- descriptions of sexual acts;
- posting sexually graphic pictures
- deliberately touching, pinching, patting, or giving inappropriate looks to another person;
- pressure for dates or sexual activity;
- unwelcome telephone calls or letters of a sexual nature;
- demands for sexual favors.

There is no single situation that constitutes sexual harassment. Rather, sexual harassment can take one of many forms.

- The harassment may be direct or indirect.
- It may be used by a supervisor as a basis for employment decisions
- It may be a generalized offensive work environment.
- The offender may be a supervisor, coworker or **subordinate**. Management may also be responsible for the acts of outside contractors who sexually harass employees in the workplace.
- The harasser may be **male or female, and the victim may be of the opposite sex or the same sex** as the harasser.

Even a consensual relationship between the harasser and the victim may involve sexual harassment. For example, if the victim agrees to sexual behavior out of fear of retaliation, the conduct of the other party may still constitute sexual harassment despite the victim's consent. The focus is on whether the conduct was unwelcome, not consensual

It is important to note that it is not how a person intended his or her actions to be taken, but rather how the actions are reasonably perceived

In determining if conduct constitutes sexual harassment, courts have considered how a "reasonable person" would perceive such conduct. Even if the harasser does not view his or her conduct as objectionable, a reasonable person might.

An isolated incident, or even a few such incidents, usually will not be considered sufficient to establish a hostile working environment. However, supervisors are encouraged to take corrective action when such isolated incidents occur, in order to ensure that future conduct does not rise to the level of a hostile working environment.

Whatever form the sexual harassment may take, it is important that it be recognized and that prompt action be taken against the offender.

### **How Can I Prevent Sexual Harassment?**

There are a number of ways that Treasury employees at all levels can help prevent sexual harassment:

- The Department, as well as the individual bureaus, have issued policy statements against sexual harassment. Make yourself and your co-workers aware of this policy by encouraging management to distribute it to all employees and to post it in prominent locations.
- Management should ensure that the Department's "zero tolerance" policy has been distributed and is understood by all employees. Supervisors should also make it clear that they will not tolerate any sexually harassing behavior among their employees.
- All employees must attend mandatory sexual harassment prevention training. Make sure you attend a training session and understand the definitions, procedures, and consequences of sexual harassment. Employees must make an effort to keep the workplace professional and avoid situations or topics of discussion of a sexual nature. What you might find humorous, others might find offensive or disturbing.

You are better off being overly cautious about comments made in the workplace, rather than taking chances. When in doubt, do not make the comment, joke, etc... It is up to every employee in the workplace to set boundaries of appropriate and inappropriate behavior. If you fear that your own behavior **has been misunderstood**, take the time to explain and apologize to your co-worker.

If you feel that you are the victim of sexual harassment, take action immediately. If management is made aware of harassing conduct promptly, action can be quickly taken to prevent a recurrence of such conduct. If an offender is counseled or disciplined for sexually harassing behavior, the behavior should cease and others will be discouraged from similar actions.

If you are a supervisor or manager, and an employee informs you of objectionable behavior in the workplace, **you must take immediate action.**

- You should talk to the individuals and find out all you can about the allegations.
- You should immediately take appropriate corrective action, which may include counseling or disciplinary action.
- You cannot ignore the situation or cover up the allegations. If you do, the agency may be liable for damages and you may ultimately be subject to disciplinary action.
- Contact your EEO or Personnel office if you need additional assistance or guidance in handling a sexual harassment situation.

### **What Options Are Available If I Believe That I Have Been The Victim of Sexual Harassment?**

There are a number of steps that you may take in order to resolve a sexual harassment problem in your workplace.

- If possible, speak with the individual directly and inform him or her that you feel the behavior is inappropriate. Informal action such as this may be enough to put an end to the harassing behavior. The Merit Systems Protection Board found that **direct communication is the most effective means of stopping sexually harassing behavior**.
- Document any such discussions you have with the harasser and any further occurrences of sexually harassing behavior.
- If direct communication with the harasser is not possible, or fails to stop the behavior, report the harassment to your supervisor.
- If your supervisor is the harasser, speak to the next level of management.
- If the above options do not resolve the problem, call your bureau's hotline number for reporting incidents of sexual harassment or contact an EEO counselor about filing a formal complaint.
- All Department of the Treasury bureaus have established hotline numbers for reporting incidents of sexual harassment. These numbers are provided at the end of this brochure. You may call the hotline number for your bureau at any time to report an incident of sexual harassment, and need not identify yourself if you are concerned about the potential consequences. However, should you wish to pursue the formal complaint process, it will be necessary to identify yourself.

You can take any or all of the actions listed above. **Remember that you should always first make it clear to the harasser that you find the behavior unwelcome.** That action is often enough to put an end to the sexually harassing behavior.

### **How Do I File a Formal Complaint?**

- The filing of an EEO complaint involves a number of standard procedures:

- You must contact an EEO counselor within 45 days of the last harassing incident. The names and telephone numbers of EEO counselors for your bureau should be posted in the building where you work.
- The EEO counselor will listen to your allegations and talk to the other involved parties in order to attempt to reach informal resolution of the problem.
- The EEO counselor will also offer you the opportunity to raise your allegations to the bureau head and the Office of the Inspector General.
- If the matter is not resolved within 30 days, and the counseling period has not been voluntarily extended, the counselor will inform you of your right to file a formal complaint.
- The formal complaint must be filed with a Treasury Regional Complaint Center within 15 days of receipt of written notice of your right to file a formal complaint. Your EEO counselor will provide you with the address of the appropriate center.
- Once a formal complaint has been filed, a trained investigator from one of the Treasury Regional Complaint Centers will conduct an investigation into the complaint.
- When you receive the investigative file, you will be given the option of either a hearing before an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission Administrative Judge or a final agency decision based on the existing record.
- If you elect a hearing, one will be conducted by an EEOC Administrative Judge.
- You will receive a final decision on your complaint. When you receive the final decision, you have the right to appeal to the EEOC Office of Federal Operations within 30 days or to file suit in federal court within 90 days of the decision.
- Remember, it is illegal for the agency to take any retaliatory action against you for filing a complaint of sexual harassment

### **What Will Be the Consequences of an Administrative or Judicial Finding of Sexual Harassment?**

Where it is established that a supervisor's sexual harassment resulted in a tangible employment action being taken against an employee, the agency will be held liable.

Where a hostile working environment is established, the agency will be held liable for the acts of a co-worker or outside contractor only if the employer:

- knew or had reason to know of the acts committed; and
- failed to take prompt, effective action to remedy the situation

Where a hostile working environment is established, the agency will be held liable for the acts of a supervisor unless the agency can show:

- the employer made a reasonable effort to prevent and correct promptly any sexually harassing behavior; and
- the employee unreasonably failed to take advantage of preventive or corrective opportunities provided by the agency or otherwise avoid harm.

However, in situations where the harassment leads to a tangible employment action, such as a downgrade or termination, the agency will not have the opportunity to present the affirmative defense.

Upon an agency or EEOC finding of sexual harassment, EEOC regulations require the following:

- notice to all employees in your workplace of their right to be free from discrimination and assurance that such discrimination will not recur; and
- corrective, curative, or preventive action be taken to ensure that sexual harassment does not recur.

Pursuant to an administrative or judicial finding, the agency may also be required to reinstate annual or sick leave that you used as a result of the harassment, and provide you with any work benefits that you were denied as a result of the harassment, including any loss of earnings.

Under the Civil Rights Act of 1991, an individual who has been the victim of sexual harassment may also be entitled to receive compensatory damages.

### **What Will Happen To a Person Found to Have Engaged in Sexual Harassment?**

The Department has made a commitment that sexually harassing behavior will not be tolerated. Bureau heads will take swift and effective disciplinary action in cases where sexual harassment has been committed.

Disciplinary actions will depend on the particular circumstances of each case. Discipline may include counseling, warnings, reprimands, suspension, transfer to a different post of duty, or termination.

Additionally, a person who has engaged in sexually harassing conduct may be sued in his or her individual capacity under tort law, and may be forced to bear the cost of representation if the Justice Department makes a determination not to represent that person.

### **What Should I Do If I Am Accused of Sexual Harassment?**

If a co-worker or employee comes to you and accuses you of sexual harassment, listen to what that person has to say. Make sure you try to fully understand what that employee is feeling and why he or she feels that the behavior was inappropriate. Apologize for your behavior, and tell the employee that you will try to make certain similar conduct does not occur in the future.

Appreciate that the employee has approached you first, and provided an opportunity to solve the problem informally. Once you have discussed the incident, keep your word. Be careful to ensure that the behavior does not happen again. If a formal complaint is filed, it may be an unpleasant experience for all involved, and may result in serious disciplinary action being taken against you if the allegations are found to be true.

If you think your behavior was acceptable, or that you are being falsely accused, approach your manager and explain the situation. It may be possible for the supervisor to arrange a discussion of the incident with both you and your accuser in order to clear up the problem.

Let others know if their behavior seems inappropriate. Do not encourage or permit offensive jokes or stories by your co-workers; rather, tell them that their behavior is offensive and should stop.

Even if you do not participate, if you are a supervisor and allow such behavior, you are at fault.

If the co-worker or employee goes to your supervisor regarding an incident, understand that the supervisor has a duty to follow up on the complaint. If he or she fails to do so, the agency can be held liable for failing to keep the workplace free of harassment.

All Treasury employees are expected to fully cooperate in the investigation of any EEO complaint. Failure to cooperate may result in disciplinary action.



**Conclusion**

Do not underestimate the seriousness of sexual harassment. It is not to be tolerated in any workplace or under any circumstances. The only way to achieve a harassment-free environment is for all employees to be informed and take immediate action if they become aware of sexually harassing behavior.

**Department of the Treasury  
Sexual Harassment Hotline Numbers**

**Bureau of Alcohol,  
Tobacco and Firearms**  
1-800-ATF-2EE0  
(1-800-283-2336)

**Comptroller of the Currency** 1-800-337-8255 (Voice Mail available)  
1-800-486-9228 (TDD)  
(202) 874-4894 (Local Voice)  
(202) 874-4887 (Local TDD)

**U.S. Customs Service** 1-800-ALERT HQ  
(to report all types of discriminatory harassment)  
(202) 927-0266

**Bureau of Engraving and Printing**  
1-800-289-7493

**Departmental Offices**  
1-202-622-0900  
(202) 622-0920 (TDD)

**Federal Law Enforcement Training Center (FLETC)**  
1-800-569-7652

**Financial Management Service**  
1-800-289-7388 (202) 874-8590

**U.S. Mint**  
1-800-7527 (Voice Mail Available)  
1-800-830-7294 (202) 847-6254 (Local TDD)

**Bureau of Public Debt**  
(304) 480-6527  
(304) 480-6577 (TDD)

**U.S. Secret Service**  
1-800-420-5558  
(202) 406-9800 (Local)  
(202) 435-9805 (TDD)

**Internal Revenue Service**  
1-800-366-4484  
1-800-569-7651 (TDD)

**Office of Inspector General**  
1-800-359-3898

**Office of Thrift Supervision**  
(202) 906-7549  
1-800-390-9533 (TDD)

**Financial Crimes Enforcement  
Network (FinCEN)**  
(703) 905-3741

**Treasury Inspector General for  
Tax Administration (TIGTA)**  
(202) 283-2273